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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001327

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [KPAO](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: SOMBER REACTION TO KIM DAE-JUNG'S DEATH

REF: A. A. SEOUL 01319
[B. B. SEOUL 00823](#)
[C. C. SEOUL 00895](#)

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The public reaction to the death of former President Kim Dae-jung (reftel A) is somber and lacks the anger and anti-government sentiment that followed former President Roh Moo-hyun's death (reftels B,C) in May. Debate about funeral timing is ongoing as of COB August 19, but sources tell us Kim Dae-jung's supporters are negotiating with the government for a State Funeral, instead of a People's Funeral like Roh Moo-hyun's. North Korea informed Kim Dae-jung's staff that it would send a five-person delegation. Hundreds of people lined up at the memorial erected at City Hall and at others throughout the country to pay their respects. Media coverage of Kim's death has focused on his compelling life story and has featured the U.S. role in saving Kim's life -- a story unknown to many Koreans. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) COMMENT: Much will hinge on the government's handling of the funeral preparations, but so far the Lee Myung-bak Administration seems to be handling the aftermath deftly. A Democratic Party (DP) source told poloffs yesterday that there was concern the Lee Myung-bak Administration would try to downplay Kim's death, but so far the government appears to be willing to accept the demands for a State Funeral. At this point only a major misstep in according Kim the respect his supporters believe he deserves could cause the prevalent public sorrow to turn into anti-government anger. END SUMMARY.

Funeral Preparations

[1](#)3. (C) As of COB August 19, the government had not decided when the funeral for former President Kim Dae-jung will take place or whether it will be a People's Funeral -- like Roh Moo-hyun's -- or a State Funeral. (NOTE: A State Funeral is sponsored by the government, entails up to nine days of mourning, and the funeral day is declared a national holiday. A People's Funeral is partly funded by the government and the mourning period is seven days. Only Park Chung-hee, who was assassinated in office, has been accorded a State Funeral. END NOTE.) This afternoon, Representative Park Jie-won, a close aide to former President Kim Dae-jung, announced that the location of the official altar and of the funeral will be the National Assembly. There is speculation that former President Kim Young-sam, DP leader Chung Sye-kyun, and Prime Minister Han Seung-soo, who served as Foreign Minister under Kim Dae-jung, will co-chair the funeral committee.

[1](#)4. (C) Park Jie-won also announced that the North will send

a high-ranking five-person delegation to the funeral in Kim Jong-il's name. Yang Chang-seok, Director General for Intelligence and Analysis in the Ministry of Unification (MOU) told Pol M/C that MOU anticipates the DPRK delegation will be led by either Kim Ki-nam, a Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, or Kim Yang-geun, United Front Department Director.

Expected Outcome, Calm Response

15. (C) Former President Kim Dae-jung had been in declining health for some time and was admitted to the hospital over one month ago. In this context, his death contrasts starkly with Roh Moo-hyun's suicide. Roh's death in the middle of a corruption probe involving his wife, children, and several close aides was a shock to the Korean people, and many held the Lee Myung-bak Administration responsible for his death by perpetrating what they claimed was a politically-motivated investigation. Kim's death, though a profoundly sad occasion to most Koreans, lacked the shock value and has contributed to a more muted response.

16. (C) The government set up 18 memorials in 16 provinces and cities. Many mourners were reportedly frustrated initially when police blocked Deoksugung Place last night where citizens had set up ad hoc altars for former President Roh last May. The government's decision to open the Seoul City Hall Plaza today, however, seems to have assuaged the criticism. Those who gathered today to pay respects at the City Hall memorial were a noticeably different crowd than Roh's mourners. Roh's mourners were young, but Kim's tended to be older. The anti-government posters were also absent and there has been little indication that leftist groups are trying to foment discord.

Media Focused on Kim's Life

17. (SBU) Media coverage has focused on Kim's compelling life story -- the many assassination attempts, surviving the KCIA's kidnapping, his extraordinary political career, and many diplomatic successes. The conservative daily JoongAng Ilbo devoted 16 pages to Kim's death, quoting his rivals -- including former conservative Presidents Kim Young-sam, Chun Doo-hwan, and Roh Tae-woo -- who all spoke highly of Kim. Another conservative daily, the DongA Ilbo, emphasized his 'DJ-nomics' to overcome the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis and his yet-unrealized dream of achieving reunification. The third major conservative newspaper, Chosun Ilbo, said that Kim was 'an axis' of Korean politics and predicted a fundamental change in Korean politics after his death. The liberal daily Kyunghyang quoted President Obama's condolence message describing Kim as a champion of democracy and human rights.

18. (C) The role of the U.S. Government in saving Kim Dae-jung's life and in harboring him in exile has figured prominently in all news stories. In Korea, many still blame the U.S. for not preventing the Korean police response to the 1980 Gwangju Uprising but are woefully uneducated about the U.S. role in arguing for Kim's pardon after he was sentenced to death by former President Chun Doo-hwan. His death has thrust this story to center stage and has ironically helped publicize positive aspects of the United States' pre-democracy involvement in Korea.

19. (SBU) The online response has also been muted but more critical of the government than the mainstream news media. On popular portal websites like Daum Agora, people uploaded personal stories about Kim Dae-jung, especially experiences from before his political days. The top three most popular postings on the Daum discussion website, however, have been critical of the government's hesitation in deciding the type of funeral -- People's versus State. Other postings warned the government not to block gatherings mourning Kim's death.

